

## PERIPATETIC WORDS

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English is perhaps the most mongrel of languages; Spanish and Swahili are the nearest runners-up. Unlike the French, who try to keep their language pure, the English gloat in this mongrelization. In the beginning they had foreign words imposed upon them by conquerors. They have borrowed words from practically every language in Europe except Lithuanian. They have borrowed words from Asia, Africa, the Americas and Polynesia. They have compounded many of these words without regard to their origin (automobile, for example, is a Greek-Latin compound), and they are continuously inventing new words like **xerox**, **googol** and **blurb** to add to the corpus.

Basically, English is a mixture of about 25% Anglo-Saxon, 40% French, 20% Latin, 5% Greek, and 10% others.

An Anglo-Saxon word like **four** can be traced through the primitive Germanic languages to the original Indo-European tongue. **Sea** can be traced to the primitive Germanic, but no further. It was apparently borrowed from an extinct non-Indo-European tongue. Such words that can be traced to a single language are called **direct borrowed words**. A dictionary sampling shows that about 65% of our language is direct borrowed.

**Very** was borrowed from French but we are not sure where the French got it, so it is a direct borrowed word. **Suet** was borrowed from the French who in turn had borrowed it from Latin. Thus it was borrowed twice, once by the French and once by the English. In fact, about 70% of the borrowed French words were in turn borrowed from Latin (some authorities say 90% of all French words are Latin-derived). **Adobe** was borrowed from the Spanish who had borrowed it from Arabic. About 20% of the Spanish words we have borrowed are of Arabic origin.

Words such as these which were borrowed from one language, who, in turn, had borrowed it from another, are called **double borrowed**. My search revealed that 25% of dictionary words are double borrowed.

It has been estimated that 20% of all Latin words were borrowed from Greek, a fact verified by my sample. **Dish** is an Anglo-Saxon derived word borrowed from Latin which borrowed it from Greek, a double-borrowed word. **Desk** is an Italian word borrowed from the same Latin word and in turn borrowed from Greek. Such words are **triple borrowed**. My search indicated that 8% of dictionary words are triple borrowed.

About 10% of the Greek words examined were borrowed, mainly from Hebrew and Persian. Alabaster was borrowed from Old French, borrowed from Latin, borrowed from Greek, borrowed from Egyptian. Coffee was borrowed from Dutch, borrowed from Italian, borrowed from Turkish, borrowed from Arabic. These words are quadruple borrowed and my sampling shows a probability that 2% of dictionary words are so borrowed. An interesting quadruple borrowed word is *filibuster* which was borrowed from the Spanish who borrowed it from the French. The French adopted the word from the English *freebooter* which had been borrowed from the Dutch. This makes it, in essence, a word we borrowed from ourselves.

Beyond this point, the search becomes statistically unreliable due to the small size of the sample. This does not mean that there are no more complex borrowings. For example, *arsenic* was borrowed from the French through Latin, Greek, Syriac, and Persian. *Rice* was borrowed from French through Italian, Latin, Greek, and Persian. *Fustic* was borrowed from French through Spanish, Arabic, Greek, and Persian. *Lilac* was borrowed from French via Spanish, Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit. *Sugar* was borrowed from French through Arabic, Persian, Prakrit, and Sanskrit. These are quintuply borrowed words.

For  $x$ -tuple borrowed words, the above data suggest the equation  $\log y = 2.36 - 0.5x$ , where  $y$  is the percentage of all words that are  $x$ -tuply borrowed.

I have not been able to find any sextuple or higher borrowed words, although the equation predicts that more than one word in every five hundred ought to have this property. However, if past experience is any criterion, readers will come up with them in the next issue of *Word Ways*.

#### *OED TO BE COMPUTERIZED*

*Laurence Urdang, Inc. have been selected as consultants to help place the 60-million-word corpus of the Oxford English Dictionary (including all Supplements) into computer memory. This will allow OED editors to interfile new words and meanings, and researchers to undertake many previously-impossible lexicographic studies. (A logological example: what words in the OED end in -gry?) The entire job will cost about ten million dollars, and employ 120 keyboard operators for twelve to eighteen months.*